

Incorporating Hands-On Activities in Religious Studies Classes

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Abstract

The mission of an Islamic school is to foster an Islamic Learning Environment that develops the spiritual, scholastic, emotional, social, and physical need of each child. This paper describes how important it is to make a Religious Studies classroom more interesting and attractive to the students. This is done by incorporating activities such as hands-on, discovery using multimedia, using paper/cardboards to model different stories from the Qur'an, flash cards and memory games for recall and memorizing, and using problem-solving activities to teach Islamic concepts (ie. Zakat). A thorough description and some examples of hands-on activities are provided in this paper.

Description of Presenter:

Fatma AbdelHafiz started her career in the US as an interpreter for the Arabic Language at John Hopkins' University Hospital. Currently, she is a Religious Studies and Arabic Language teacher and as the Head of the Department of Arabic and Religious Studies at New Horizon School, LA. for nine years. She is an active member of ACTFL and attends all Islamic Studies and teacher-development workshops sponsored by the BIAE, Aldeen Foundation, and many others. In addition to teaching, Ms. AbdelHafiz also organizes and develops all Islamic-related religious events/activities conducted by her school (ie. Hajj Simulation, Ramadan Celebration, etc.).

I. Statement of the Problem & Review of Literature:

A well-rounded Islamic Studies education that implements the values and morals of the teachings of Islam is direly needed in America. In a study conducted by Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, he reports that sixty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that it is “very” and “quite” important to have Islamic schools in America (1997). Therefore, it should be the goal of the Muslim community to provide Muslim children with the opportunity to live and learn amongst their Muslim peers through a nourishing environment that elaborates on the essence of Islam. Such an environment would mainly be provided through Islamic schools as they help to promote a healthy Muslim identity.

The benefits of exposing Muslim students to Religious Studies in the classroom incorporate the means to developing self-confidence and the ability to become productive members of society (“Mission, Vision, & Goals,” 2010 & Peek, 2005). There are a number of reasons why Muslim schools and the study of religion are important. For example, in such Muslim schools, the guidelines of Islam are taught and practiced in the classroom. Also, the teachers can sustain a proper Islamic atmosphere. The Muslim students would be expected to wear Islamic attire and behave accordingly. Most importantly, Religious Studies can be very beneficial in allowing Muslim students to tackle current events and relate to the world through an Islamic point of view (Syed, 2001).

The advantages of implementing Islamic Studies vary from an individual level to a community level. In regards to an individual level, each Muslim student would be able to adapt personal characteristics preached in Islam, including honesty, truthfulness, hard work, innovativeness, determination, fairness, kindness, etc. In addition to this, teaching Islamic Studies to Muslim Americans can positively affect the community at large, with the teachings of

Islam implemented in everyday life and in interactions with society. Islamic studies will promote a strong Islamic community, which would implement such teachings in different aspects of public service such as establishing various community hospitals, parks, and homeless feeding events (Syed, 2001).

To foster an Islamic learning environment, such Religious Studies classes would need to be both motivational and enjoyable. This can be accomplished through implementing factors such as a positive attitude towards learning, creativity, and mere fun. It has been proven through a number of studies that hands-on activities are amongst the most effective learning styles. A hands-on approach allows the students to become active participants versus passive learners because it promotes student independency and creativity in problem solving.

Students vary on a wide spectrum from those who have difficulties in certain learning arenas to those who are simply not interested in learning. Hands-on activities would stimulate both ends of the spectrum and allow the students to have fun and absorb information that they normally wouldn't through conventional teaching styles such as lectures. In other words, students who are exposed to hands-on activities have a better chance of remembering the material and would also feel a sense of accomplishment after the activity has been completed. A Chinese Proverb states:

I hear and I forget
I see and I remember
I do and I understand

In essence, the goal is to have each student become a part of the learning experience versus being a mere spectator.

According to a study entitled, "The Academic Value of Hands-on Craft Projects in Elementary Schools," instructors reported devoting most of their classroom time to hands-on

activities because they noticed that their students did significantly better and retained the information for a longer period of time. The teachers reported that the students who engaged in hands-on activities scored significantly higher on their understanding of the material when compared to the students who were only taught through mere lectures. Their report states:

“In classes that spent almost half instructional time on hands-on projects (48%), students scored an average of 83 out of a possible 100 on the knowledge application task. By comparison, students whose classes devoted low percentage of class time to hands-on craft projects (11.8%) scored an average of 75”

(2002).

While participating in hands-on activities, the students would share a set of integrated goals and work together in understanding the material. This would promote team work and allow the students to become more willing to ask questions and to volunteer information; as well as, improving the students' behavior and socialization skills. In addition to that, instead of being bombarded with large sums of information, the students would gain a sense of curiosity and seek that information themselves (HIA Foundation, 2002). Therefore, in order to allow Muslim students to obtain a vivid understanding of the concepts and facts revolving around Islam, hands-on activities should definitely be incorporated in all Religious/Islamic Studies classrooms (Haury, 1994).

II. Methods & Recommendations of Practical implementation:

Level I:

i. Using flash cards to help memorize the Qur'an:

This activity is done by first dividing the classroom into groups of two. Each group is then given a Controlling Mother Card (which is a big Flash card that contains numbers, with each number representing the order of words in a particular Ayah. So for example, for the Ayah "Kol Howa Allaho Ahad," the numbers on the Controlling Mother Card will be (1), (2), (3), and (4) in consecutive order). After each group is given the Controlling Mother Card for a particular Ayah, the instructor then puts flash cards upside down on each group's desk, with each flash card with contain one word in the selected Ayah. So for example, for the Ayah "Kol Howa Allaho Ahad," there will have 4 flash cards, one card for each word in the Ayah.) The students of each group will then work together, with each member of the group taking his/her turn to flip a flash card and matching it to the appropriate order of the word in the Ayah (For example, for the Ayah "Kol Howa Allaho Ahad," Student A picks and flips over a flash card that has the word "Allaho" on it. The student will then have to match the word "Allaho" to the number that best fits the order of the word in the Ayah-- number (3) on the Controlling Mother Card).

ii. Paper Modeling for Quranic Stories:

This hands-on activity must first be prepared for by the instructor who prints out Lap book templates for each student from free online sources (ie. url: <http://www.homeschoolshare.com>) and brings them to class. Some examples of this activity include creating a Lap book for Prophet Nuh's story, using an arc-shaped template and creating a Lab book for Surat AlNahl, using a bee-shaped template.

Level II:***i. Using Memory Games for Recall in Islamic Studies:***

An example of this hands-on activity is the Hajj Lesson memory game. The teacher would first write the lesson's glossary terms ('Tawaf', 'Sa'a', 'Mina', 'Mount Arafat', 'Al-Muzdalaffa', and 'Jamorat Sacrafices') twice on two separate note cards. Then the students are asked to flip all the note cards upside down so that they can not see the glossary terms on the other side of each note card. After this step is over with, the students are then ready to play the Hajj Lesson memory game, which is played the same way any memory game is played. Due to repetition and the visual display of the glossary terms, the students are able to memorize them better.

ii. Use of Multimedia for Memory and Recall:

For this activity, the instructor schedules computer lab time ahead of time, which is usually arranged and organized with the school administration. Under the instructor's supervision, he/she tells the students to go to an online Quranic teaching website designed to facilitate the recall and memorization of the Quran and/or Hadith for Muslim children (ie. url: <http://www.harfkids.com>).

Level III:***i. Classrooms Discussions and Visual Presentations:***

There are many directions the instructor can take and lead this hands-on activity. One example of this activity is instructing the students to create a mini platform of a specific Islamic event/activity (ie. Hajj). The students will assist the instructor in cutting out and gluing the 3-D paper-shaped objects on a thick-layered platform. After the layout platform is ready for use, the

instructor then gives each student objects (representing people) and asks each one of the students to first describe how a certain activity is done, and then show the class how that activity is performed using the platform that was created and the object given by the instructor.

ii. Using Multimedia for the Understanding of Quranic Stories:

Under the instructor's supervision, he/she tells the students to go to an online Islamic teaching website designed to facilitate the understand of Quranic stories for Muslim children (ie. url: <http://www.islamicity.com-- Kids Corner>). This website also allows students to color online, memorize and practice the different Ahadiths. .

Levels IV & V:

i. Using Online Islamic Quizzes to Compete with Other Fellow Students:

Under the instructor's supervision, he/she tells the students to go to the online website <http://www.albalagh.net/kids/quiz> or to <http://islamcan.com/quiz/index.shtml> to take an online quiz that will test their knowledge in Islam. Taking these online quizzes is very beneficial to the student because not only will the student be able to know how much material he/she has grasped, but he/she will also have the opportunity to learn the correct answers of the questions that they missed (because after the answers are submitted by the student, the results demonstrate the number of questions that were answered correctly/incorrectly, and for the ones that were answered incorrectly, the correct answer is given).

ii. Create Models to Represent an Islamic Studies Lesson:

This hands-on activity is done by assigning students to a specific topic and asking them to do their research, prepare a presentation, and create a model representing his/her topic (ie. poster,

Lap book, etc.). The main advantage of this hands-on activity is that it could be done as many times as possible/needed during the school year.

iii. Sing Songs and Create Plays to Reinforce Quranic Stories and Islamic Values:

A great way to incorporate hands-on activities in Islamic Studies classrooms is by allowing the students to nurture their spirituality and imagination by allowing them to sing Islamic songs and/or perform scenes from Quranic stories or Islamic lessons. As an example, the teacher could direct the class to memorize one of Hamza Robertson's or Yusuf Islam's songs.

iv. Implement Math to Teach Lessons:

This activity could be done in a variety of ways. One way to implement this hands-on activity is by assigning students to a topic that is related to Islam (ie. Muslims in Malaysia), and asking them to do their research on the topic, write a paper, and present their specific topic to the class using visual aids that are mathematical in nature (ie. pie charts and bar graphs representing the total number of Muslims living in Malaysia versus the rest of the world, etc.) Another way to implement mathematics in Islamic lessons is by handing out a Zakat worksheet to the class. The instructor would allow the students to work on the handout independently at first, but then he/she could ask the students to show their work on the board—which would allow the class to interact and discuss these Islamic-related mathematical problems and would allow the transfer of feedback to and from students.

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